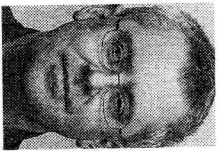


# The Comeback Kid now has Wings of Blue



**TOM ARNEBERG**  
Community columnist

"Whoa, it's the 'Comeback Kid'!"

Those were the words of the cadets guarding the entrance to the air field a couple of weeks ago at the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAF), after they peered through the driver's-side car window and spotted my son Jasper in the passenger seat. The gates went up for us immediately.

It was fun driving around with Jasper — he was somewhat of a celebrity! Only two days before, he had passed the last of several tests to earn a spot on PTWOB — "Parachute Team, Wings of Blue." PTWOB is the premier sky-diving team at the Academy, and getting there is not easy.

Especially if you tear your ACL after only 21 jumps.

There are usually around a thousand cadets per class at USAFA, and each year, 25 sophomores ("Third Class Cadets") are selected for the "Wings of Green" (WOG).

WOGs are like the JV for the parachute team. These cadets have just endured a year of

hardships as freshmen ("doo-lies"), and finally get to relax a bit as they enter their second year and watch the new doolies get ordered around.

But now the WOGs find themselves at the bottom of the heap again, as the low men (and women) on the totem pole of the parachute team. And they have a lot to learn.

Most of them have only five jumps under their belts. In their first month or two as WOGs, they must learn to pack their own chutes, under careful supervision of the enlisted personnel assigned to the parachute team.

There's a big quote painted on the wall of the parachute training center: "Human flight in its purest form." Maybe floating down beneath a canopy is not really all that pure, but keep in mind that before the chute opens, you are flying with just your body.

And at the Academy, they like to do a bit of "flying" before deploying their chutes. In fact, this is the only place in the country where you get to free-fall on your very first jump.

But before your first jump, there is a solid week of training, under the tutelage of the Wings of Blue. In addition to hours of ground training and lectures, cadets jump off platforms into pea gravel, and hang in harnesses suspended from the high ceilings of the training center.

Our Scouts from Chippewa Falls Scout Troop 72 enjoyed



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Jasper Arneberg of Chippewa Falls overcame a torn ACL to secure a spot on the U.S. Air Force Academy's premier skydiving team.

some experience in those harnesses on our way to Philmont in 2010. In fact, that was the first time Jasper tried them out, as a 16-year-old!

During training, the PTWOB instructors try to distract the students to make sure they can still execute the proper procedures under pressure. The distractions can include swinging, spinning, yelling, and even simulating colliding skydivers when the instructor jumps up and grabs onto the poor swinging, spinning student. That intense week of training is all for the first five jumps. Once the 25 WOGs are selected, a whole new level of training begins, including getting in as many jumps as possible.

There's no replacing the judgment and timing you learn by

jumping over and over. In fact, you need 500 jumps in order to parachute into a stadium packed with 50,000 roaring fans.

Jasper was just getting started in building up his jump count last October when he tore his ACL playing intramural basketball. After surgery in November, he was told he couldn't jump until MAY.

He still got up at 5:30 a.m. most days to head down to the air field (earlier than most college students), and he went with the team on training trips to Florida and Arizona. But he could not jump.

In late April, when he was finally cleared by his doctor for all activity, Jasper had but two weeks to make all his required jumps. He almost gave up hope due to bad

weather that first week, but the final week was a blinding flurry of parachuting.

The whole team was rooting for him, knowing what he had been through and how much he had to make up. On the other hand, Jasper admits he "may have pushed a little too hard" in scheduling all the jumps and training scenarios needed. (Jasper, pushing hard? Can't be!)

He did it! He finished his last qualifying jump with only two days to spare. He received his coveted blue suit in front of a thousand people on May 16 in the biggest Blue Suit ceremony ever, as former PTWOBs flew in from all over the country to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wings of Blue. There was even a real live ASTRONAUT in attendance, as distinguished by his lighter blue jump suit.

It's amazing to think that Jasper, who had never parachuted in his life before ten months ago, will now be TEACHING the new sophomores how to do it this summer.

The main mission of the Air Force Academy is to develop leaders, and they know how to do it quickly. Now Jasper is getting "junpier" than ever. The comeback kid still has a long way to go to hit that magic 500 number.

*Tom Arneberg of Chippewa Falls is an engineer, Scoutmaster and father of five. He can be reached at Tom@Arneberg.com.*